

TESTIMONY – "VOTING PROBLEMS IN FLORIDA'S 3RD CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT
AND THROUGHOUT THE STATE"

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SENATE COMMITTEE ON Rules
JUNE 28th, 2001

The Honorable Chairman Christopher Dodd,
The Honorable Mitch McConnell, Ranking Member,
Members of the Committee,
and other distinguished guests,

Thank you for inviting me to testify before your Committee. It is a privilege and an honor to speak to you today about a subject that is close to my heart -- the hard won right of EVERY AMERICAN to vote and to have their vote *accurately* counted.

In 1992, I became one of three African Americans elected from Florida to the U.S. House of Representatives in 128 years! My election that year, along with two other African Americans from Florida -- Alcee Hastings and Carrie Meek -- ushered in a new political era in the state, and a time of greater representation for Florida's African Americans.

Eight years later, on November 7th, 2000, millions of Americans went to the polls to vote for the President of the United States. The whole nature of this presidential election -- from the road blocks set up in Black areas, to the misidentified felons kicked off the rolls, to the votes being thrown out -- is simply inexcusable. Our current president was selected by the Supreme Court, not the American people, in complete disregard for the dangerous precedents set in our country's history when the supreme court justices undermined the will of the people.

Instances such as the following that occurred in Florida during the last election absolutely cannot be allowed to happen again:

in Duval county, 27,000 votes were thrown out, 16,000 of them from African-American voters. We know that more than 20 percent of the votes cast in predominantly African-American precincts were discarded and that the Duval County Supervisor of Elections issued a sample ballot that was different from the official ballot, in complete violation of the law that mandates them to be the same.

This proved more than confusing to voters since the sample ballot instructed people to vote on every page, and the actual ballot instructed people to vote on appropriate pages. Since there were two pages of presidential candidates, the 22,000 over-votes for president should not come as a surprise to anyone. Even more disturbing to me is that the Supervisor's office didn't release these figures to local officials until after the deadline had passed to request a recount. Having been an election monitor in countries across the world, I can tell you that we would never certify another country's election if it had as many flaws as we had in Florida.

Whether the mistakes made during election day were deliberate or not, the system that we have in place disenfranchised African-American voters in record numbers. We have a system that discourages people from voting and we have a system that discriminates against minorities and against the poor.

Since the election, I have listened to hours of testimony from Florida citizens who were denied their right to vote or were harassed at the poll in some way. I have listened to attorneys testify to the unbelievable arrogance of persons officially involved in the election whose behavior resulted in injustice to, especially, African American voters.

Throughout the 20th Century, African Americans have fought injustice. In the heart of my district in Jacksonville, during the 1960's, blacks were forced away from the food counters throughout the city by police with ax handles. Yet the community kept coming back, demonstrating, and following the lead of Dr. Martin Luther King. We saw our schools integrated, and we kept demanding more.

We are here today, at the beginning of the new millennium, to discuss the disenfranchisement of thousands and thousands of voters. I would like to end by saying that the African American community will not settle for anything less than equality, and I in particular, will not sleep in peace until fair, inclusive, election reform is implemented throughout our nation. Simply providing money to states with so called conditions is entirely unacceptable, as prescribed by the McConnell bill. I strongly believe that there should be mandatory standards that every state should be required to meet. Civil rights laws have never been optional and should NOT be optional today. This is the principle reason why I am a cosponsor of the Dodd-Conyers bill.

I appreciate your time and sincere interest. I am available to answer any questions.